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SUBJECT: DISENGAGEMENT SITUATION REPORT, AUGUST 17, 2005

This is a joint message from Embassy Tel Aviv and Consulate General Jerusalem.

This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly. This message conveys information as of 1700 hours local time.

1. (SBU) Summary: On the third day of disengagement, IDF soldiers and police began to evacuate several settlements by force, meeting almost exclusively non-violent resistance. While most settlers continued to leave their homes either voluntarily or after brief non-violent refusal, Israeli Police and IDF forces clashed with hardliner settlers and non-resident agitators who had infiltrated areas designated for evacuation. The Head of IDF operations said the evacuations are proceeding faster than anticipated, and some Israeli leaders are now gauging the settler evacuation process in days rather than weeks. The message below outlines the status of evacuation efforts at key Israeli settlements; the overall security situation in Gaza; Palestinian reactions to disengagement; and internal Israeli political developments. End Summary.

#### 2. (SBU) SETTLER EVACUATION STATUS

-- According to press reports, Head of IDF Operations Israel Ziv said that the evacuation is proceeding faster than anticipated. The IDF announced that the Israeli residents of 583 houses and public buildings have been evacuated, out of a total of 2206 buildings that exist throughout all Israeli communities in the Gaza strip.

-- Significant numbers of settlers voluntarily left prior to the August 16 midnight deadline that rendered their continued presence illegal, jeopardized compensation and subject them to physical removal.

-- During forced evacuations on April 17, Israeli police and IDF forces clashed with some settlers. However, in most instances the IDF has been successful in negotiating the voluntary departure of those resisting evacuation with only limited delays. Israeli agitators who had recently infiltrated Gaza continue to challenge evacuation efforts, primarily through non-violent means.

-- An Israeli settler took a weapon from an Israeli guard at Shilo settlement in the West Bank and opened fire, killing three Palestinians and wounding two.

-- A settler, resident of Qedumim settlement in the West Bank, set herself on fire in the Negev town of Netivot, presumably to protest disengagement. She caused burns to 60 percent of her body and is in serious condition.

-- Press reports indicate that approximately 2,000 disengagement protestors gathered today outside Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Sycamore Ranch in the Negev. They promised to disperse after 19:00.

-- There were various fires to protest disengagement all throughout the Gaza Strip. Protestors in Morag set a garbage dumpster on fire, while protestors in Bedolah set tires and at least two homes on fire. In Neve Dekalim, at least 60 homes were burned, and in Atzmona, residents asked the IDF for packing boxes and then burned them.

-- Residents in Kfar Darom cut cables, pierced tires, and put sugar in the gas tanks of IDF D-9 bulldozers. A female soldier was stabbed with a needle by an infiltrator in Morag, and protestors threw eggs and plastic bottles at troops in Neve Dekalim.

#### 3. (SBU) STATUS OF INDIVIDUAL SETTLEMENTS

The following is an outline of the evacuation of the Gaza Strip and West Bank settlements as of 1700 hrs August 17, according to IDF reports and Israeli media.

Atzmona: Press reports in the morning indicated that all of the estimated 83 families in the settlement agreed with the IDF to leave voluntarily by noon today, but the negotiations failed around mid-day. The IDF entered to evacuate by force.

Kerem Atzmona (outpost): Press reported at approximately 16:00 that the evacuation of 70 people and 16 families was complete. The settlers had negotiated to stay until this afternoon, but then said they would not leave until Saturday, August 20, so the IDF began forced evacuations at approximately 14:00.

Bedolah: As of yesterday, there were an estimated 24 families still in the settlement, although some press reports indicate that many may have been infiltrators and not actual residents of the settlements. The evacuation was complete at approximately 15:00 today.

Dugit: 100% evacuated as of approximately midnight yesterday, August 16.

Ele Sinai: Press reports indicate that there are 30 remaining families in the settlement, indicating that an estimated 44-54 have left voluntarily.

Gadid: No updates today. As of yesterday, there were an estimated 37 families remaining.

Gan Or: Press reports in the morning said that were approximately 30 families remaining, and that the IDF was prepared to evacuate by force.

Ganei Tal: All of the estimated 85 families in the settlement agreed with the IDF to leave voluntarily by 15:00 today. Fifty-eight families remained as of noon; one family was still holding out at approximately 16:00.

Kfar Darom: Only about 8 families left voluntarily during the night, but the 65 remaining families said they may evacuate voluntarily by tomorrow, August 18.

Kfar Yam: Press reports indicate that there are approximately 20 families and 500 infiltrators remaining in the settlement. The IDF was prepared to evacuate by force.

Morag: The figures for this settlement are inconsistent. The original IDF assessment said that there were 22 families in the settlement, but press reports say that over half left voluntarily yesterday and that 15-30 families remained. The IDF entered to evacuate by force, using a bulldozer to break through the gate, and completed the evacuation by 16:00.

Netzarim: All of the estimated 64 families in the settlement agreed with the IDF to leave voluntarily by Monday, August 22.

Netzer Hazani: All of the estimated 46 families that are remaining in the settlement agreed with the IDF to leave voluntarily by tomorrow, August 18.

Neve Dekalim: Almost half of the residents left the settlement by midnight, and the remaining families reached an agreement with the IDF to begin voluntary evacuation after prayers ended at 16:00. Some settlers requested an extension to finish packing.

Nissanit: Captain Uri Bar Lev reported that the settlement was completely evacuated as of the early hours of the morning, but settlers in the early afternoon claimed that ten families remained.

Peat Sadeh: 100 percent evacuated as of last night, August 16.

Qatif: No updates today. There are approximately 58 families remaining.

Rafah Yam: 100 percent evacuated as of last night, August 16.

Shelo/Shalev: 100 percent evacuated as of last night, August 16.

Tel Qatifah: There are no figures available for the number of families that lived in the settlement before disengagement, but press reported that all of 16 families remaining this morning reached an agreement with the IDF to evacuate voluntarily, and did so by approximately 14:30 on buses.

West Bank Settlements:

Gannim: 100 percent evacuated as of yesterday, August 16.

Homesh: No updates available

Kaddim: 100 percent evacuated as of yesterday, August 16.

Sa Nur: On the morning of August 17, about 600 Israelis protested IDF/Israeli police efforts to evacuate settlers.

14. (SBU) SECURITY SITUATION

-- Palestinian contacts and CNN report that an Israeli grabbed a weapon from a guard at the Israeli settlement of Shilo, located 20 km north of Ramallah and adjacent to the Palestinian village of Tormsaya.

As of 1800 local, reports are that three Palestinians are dead and two are wounded. The wounded have been transferred to hospitals in Jerusalem, where one is reportedly in critical condition and the other in serious-to-moderate condition.

LTG Ward has called PA Interior Minister Nasir Yusif and Egyptian security officials and Consul General Walles talked with Abu Mazen's Chief of Staff, Rafik Hussein, urging calm in the wake of this attack. Hussein agreed with the need for calm, but observed that this attack could easily be used a pretext for attacks by Palestinian factions.

-- Kidnapping: The French Channel 3 journalist kidnapped August 15 is still being held August 17. Gaza contacts say a family in the central Gaza strip refugee camps may be responsible, but they are unclear on a motive for the abduction. One source speculated that the kidnapping may be an effort to force concessions from the PA, such as a prisoner release by the PA and/or Israel. According to UNRWA, Security Forces have identified the vehicle used in the kidnapping as having been stolen the day before. According to a Gaza private sector contact, Gazans are angry that the PA has not taken immediate and aggressive action in response to the kidnapping. Gazans fear that the international community will withhold support if the PA fails to act. A Gaza businessman noted that people think it is strange that "no one is even whispering" about the kidnapping, whereas those responsible for such deeds are usually quick to claim responsibility.

-- Mortar/Rocket Attacks: According to the IDF, on the evening of August 16 Palestinian militants fired a Kassam rocket in the vicinity of the Nachal Oz Crossing. No injuries were reported. The IDF also reported a mortar shell firing near Gadid Village late on August 16.

-- Shootings: According to UNRWA, gunmen opened fire from an area near Malaka Observation Post. The IDF responded with heavy fire at the National Security Forces position west of the road. The PA security forces left the area until their return can be coordinated with the IDF.

-- Shootings: According to the IDF, Palestinian militants engaged in two instances of shooting at IDF soldiers late on August 16, one at the IDF post in Netzarim and the other in the vicinity of Nachal Oz crossing.

-- Incursions: According to UNRWA, IDF troops occupied a house near Netzarim while they started to demolish their observation post at the Salah Ed-Din/Netzaarim junction. In addition, the IDF removed two families from homes south of Dugit to use them as observation posts.

#### **15. (SBU) PALESTINIAN REACTIONS**

-- In an August 17 news conference from Beirut carried live by Al-Jazirah TV, Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khalid Mish'al described the disengagement as "a malicious tactic by Sharon" aimed at reinforcing Israel's grip on the West Bank. He stated that Gaza is the first liberated territory and that it will be followed by the West Bank and each and every single inch of the Palestinian territories. He declared: "We will not lay down arms. We will force our will."

-- According to Israeli media reports, Mahmoud Azahar, the head of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, called upon his organization to move the focus of its resistance to the West Bank to secure Israeli withdrawal. He also is reported to have said, "The period of calm will terminate in 2005."

#### **16. (SBU) GOI POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS**

-- At a joint mid-day press conference with President Katsav on August 17, PM Sharon paid tribute to the restraint of the settlers but offered no apologies. He said that the evacuation of Israeli settlements does not constitute the destruction of Zionism or the devastation of the settlement enterprise. The settlers' efforts had not been in vain, Sharon said, claiming that the settlement enterprise had produced very great achievements for Israel -- including American recognition of large settlement blocks in Judea and Samaria.

-- Pro- and anti-disengagement Knesset members continued to visit Gaza settlements, some to show support for the settlers, others to show sensitivity to the settlers, but support for the IDF and police. The Israeli media has interviewed numerous MKs, who, on August 17, included disengagement foes Likud MK Uzi Landau and National Religious Party MK Nissan Slomiansky. Labor Minister Matan Vilna'i was

hit on the head with an egg during his visit to Neveh Dekalim, whereupon he got back in his car and drove off. Israel radio reported August 17 that Interior Minister Ofir Pines-Paz (Labor) has called on all politicians to refrain from visiting Gush Katif.

**17. (SBU) BORDER CROSSINGS/HUMANITARIAN ACCESS**

-- Erez Crossing and Industrial Zone: According to Gaza private sector contacts, Erez is closed to Palestinians, but the IDF is allowing a small number of people to pass based on humanitarian/medical grounds with prior coordination. Some Gazan businessmen have also been able to cross.

-- Rafah Terminal: According to UNRWA, Rafah remains open.

-- Abu Kholi junction: According to UNRWA, Abu Kholi has been closed since 7 p.m. August 16 but is due to open again at 9 p.m. August 17. Gaza private sector contacts have commented that because Abu Kholi had remained open for two days, the business community has had more time to prepare for the eventual closure and, therefore, the negative impact may be significantly less than previously thought.

-- Karni Terminal: According to Gaza private sector contacts Karni was open on August 17.

-- Kissufim, the main crossing used to enter Gush Katif and Kfar Darom settlements, remains closed.

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